

The Cobbe Portrait

By
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“A petty sneaking thief I knew.”
—William Blake¹

1 Spurious Portraits

Most life-like portraits are those which represent the very heart of the painter and not of the sitter; and knowing that the obvious test of a newly discovered portrait is its history or pedigree, we may justify how the great collector of Shakespearian relics, Halliwell-Phillipps, without a pedigree, would not look at any article, and another noted scholar, Dr. F. J. Furnivall, refused to consider any portrait that could not be traced to Shaksper's family or intimate friends.

Many portraits have over the centuries, popped up for the world's belief they represent the Immortal Bard. “It would be futile to attempt to make the record of the pretended portraits complete.” Lee wrote. “Upwards of sixty have been offered for sale to the National Portrait Gallery since its foundation in 1856, and not one of these has proved to possess the remotest claim to authenticity.”² This is certainly discouraging, because Stopes also had her doubts: “Many other oil paintings and miniatures of unproven authenticity have been put forward as likenesses of the poet, but so diverse are they in their characteristics, that it is impossible that they can be genuine.”³

Portraits of the sixteenth and seventeenth century were as unreliable as royal favours. When the publisher wanted a portrait to embellish a book to make it sell, he applied to the poor engraver who was usually applying his trade in an attic, to create one. Sometimes engravers used old plates, altering or substituting faces as they thought best. In Abraham Wivell's *Inquiry* (1827), he takes the authority of Ireland (the father of the infamous Shakespearean forger) on how many portraits examined by him were to be stated as originals.

Hardly anyone cared to possess Shakespeare's portrait; and until John Aubrey records in 1680, sixty-four years after the actor's death, that he was reputed to have been “a handsome, well-shaped man,” no writer ever said a word as to his personal appearance.

It is but fair to add, that as to portraits, Edmund Spenser stands in precisely the same position as Shakespeare. The portraits claimed for him are hopelessly discrepant; and it is hard to say which should be accepted and which rejected, since forgeries tend to take centre stage.

¹ *On Cromek*.

² *A Life of Shakespeare*. P. 29.

³ *Shakespeare's Environment*. P. 107. London: G. Bell & Sons, 1918.

A well-known example of forgery is the equestrian portrait of King Charles I., where after Cromwell assumed rule, a portrait was required, and a fine equestrian engraving was produced. The portraits of the first Charles had been put out of sight, and it was some time before it was discovered that Cromwell's head had been substituted for that of his decapitated victim. No other change was made in the picture.

Why forgery was considered necessary by the greatest experts of the Stratford cult, is beyond any rational reader's thoughts. So strong has its obsession become, that moral considerations and elementary honesty must go by the board to save the wreck of the good ship called "The Stratford Case." For us, in digging up the truth, it might be, as Bolton Corney had stated: "The more eminent the man whose course of life prompts our curiosity, the more earnest is our desire to establish those particulars on conclusive evidence. This instinctive desire needs no apology."⁴

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The Cobbe Portrait

It was unveiled at the Stratford Shakespeare Centre on April 23, 2009, as the "newly discovered" Shakespeare portrait. Prior to its exhibition, the top layer of paint was removed by art conservators in an attempt to uncover suspected original versions beneath; it was restored in 2002. The restoration was termed as an attempt not so smart; removing the layer has robbed us of potential rare insights, and any physical evidence that could have been detected, is now removed.

The portrait belonged to Alec Cobbe's family, for more than 250 years; it hung in an Anglo-Irish country house outside of Dublin. A descendant named Charles Cobbe left Hampshire to become the archbishop of Dublin, and he built Newbridge House in 1737. Among the treasures piled in the home were Tudor manuscripts in Latin and memorabilia from Captain Cook's sea voyages left behind by Cook's surgeon, a tenant. Among such admirable relics, were paintings, hundreds of them; among them: Cobbe.

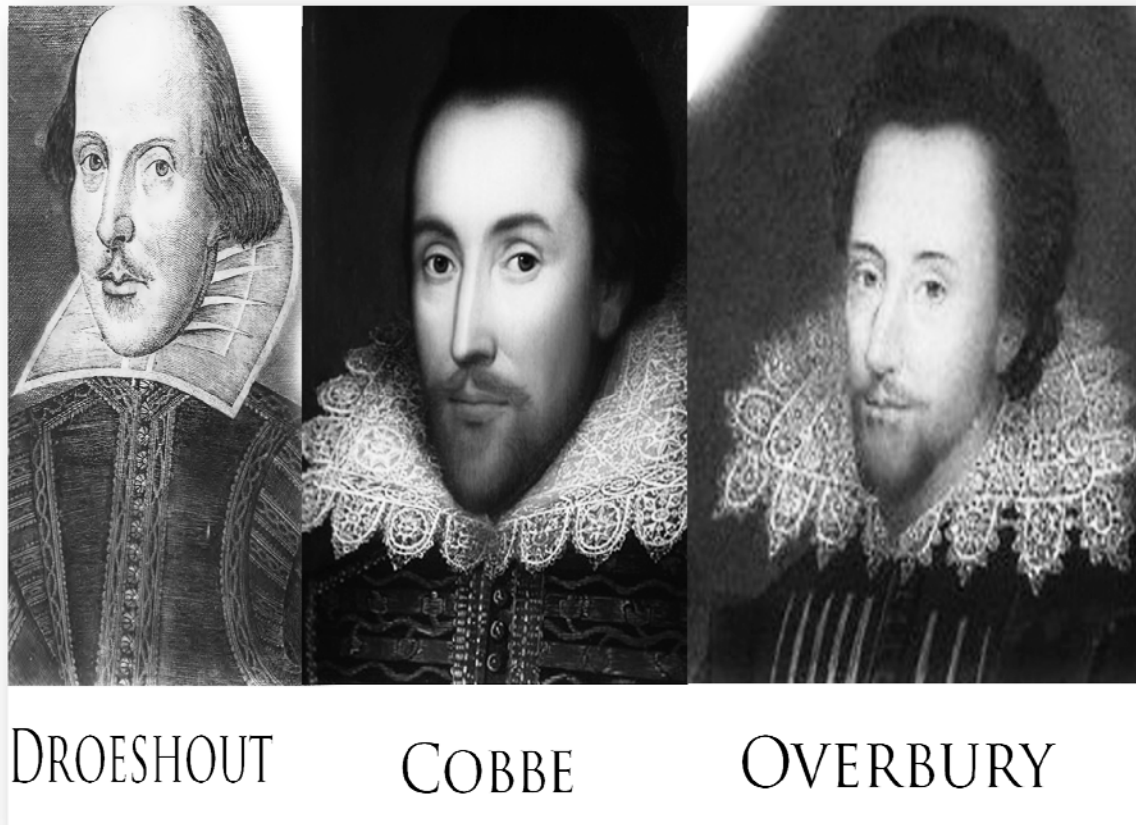
In 2009, Stanley William Wells revealed the existence of the Cobbe portrait. He stated his belief, based on three years of research, that the portrait is a true portrait of Shakespeare, painted from life. On Tuesday, October 20 of that year, he appeared on a BBC program defending his theory that "the plays of William Shakespeare were written by William Shakespeare of Stratford-Upon-Avon" debunking the theory that Shakespeare's plays were written by some of his contemporaries. No references were given to strengthen his debunking. This type of hypothesizing creates misconceptions and does not help in discovering the truth.

Wells was born on May 21, 1930, and is termed a Shakespearean scholar, as also being the current Chairman of the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust. He took his first degree at the University College of London, and was awarded an honorary DLitt by the University of Warwick in 2008. He was Professor of Shakespeare Studies and Director of the Shakespeare

⁴ *An Argument on the Assumed Birth date of Shaksper.* 1864.

Institute (University of Birmingham) from 1988–1997, and is Emeritus Professor of Shakespeare Studies. He is also general editor of the Oxford Shakespeare series.

Wells organized a press conference unveiling the Cobbe portrait as the centrepiece of the 2009 exhibition, which was called “Shakespeare Found.” His support is peculiar, since other scholars, have presented evidence that the portrait is not of Shakespeare, but rather of a Jacobean contemporary, Sir Thomas Overbury (1581–1613).



Droeshout, Cobbe, & Sir Thomas Overbury

The three year research, Wells had undertaken, was some “science” which involved a “tree-ring” study of the wooden frame of the portrait. There is no disagreement that such a “science” is possible to detect the study of the frame as being genuine and coming from the Elizabethan or Jacobean era; what is disagreed upon, is the 99% surety Wells takes, that the face depicts the Bard. There have been no portraits, genuine, depicting the Bard’s features. Just placing their comparison on the Martin Droeshout image, is dangerous, to say the least.

However, Wells has rejected objections that have been raised about the Droeshout image “looking too different” from the Cobbe portrait by saying that “painters (like

photographers) have ever flattered. Droeshout simplified the portrait for his brass plate;" adding that engravers "usually did simplify and update."

We find it necessary (for clarity purposes) to offer a brief note of our investigation on how the Droeshout image in the First Folio (1623) was created.

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The Droeshout Image

"Paint me as I am," said Oliver Cromwell shaking Sir Peter Lely, the artist, roughly by the shoulder. "If you leave out the scars and wrinkles I will not pay you a shilling." Wrinkles or not, the Droeshout image has been criticized by many; one of these critics has been Briton: "It cannot be like any human face, for it is evidently ill drawn, in all the features; and a bad artist can never make a good likeness."

James Boaden, in his criticisms on the portrait, remarks that "it is made to furnish out a portrait of the poet in the edition of 1623; in that of 1632, in which it continued very tolerable; and in the two latter Folios of 1664 and 1685, when I confess it to have become, what it has frequently been called, an abominable libel upon humanity."⁵

Martin Droeshout (1601–1650) without certainty has been indexed in biographical dictionaries as Dutch or French, and to have been christened on April 26, 1601. The *Dictionary of National Biography*, writes: "Martin Droeshout was admitted a member of the Dutch Church in 1624, at the age of twenty-three, and it is probably he that we may identify the artist known throughout the literary world as the engraver of the portrait of William Shakespeare prefixed to the Folio edition of his works published in 1623, with the well-known lines by Ben Jonson affixed below it."⁶ This theory was also considered by an author, George Scharf, when he wrote his article entitled *On the Principal Portraits of Shakespeare*, in the *Notes & Queries* edition of April 23, 1864.

Elsewhere, Droeshout is said to have resided in England about the year 1623, the same year the Folio was published. He was chiefly employed by the booksellers (as was Leonard Digges) and engraving some portraits, which, "if they cannot be admired for the beauty of their execution, are valued for their scarcity."⁷ In Strutt's *Biographical Dictionary of Engravers* published in 1785, Droeshout is talked of as being known to be "one of the indifferent engravers" of his century;⁸ and in Gould's *Biographical Dictionary of Painters, Sculptors, Engravers, and Architects* of 1838, Droeshout is considered to be of French origin.⁹

Whether Dutch or French, Martin Droeshout's arrival in England, the same year as the publication of the Folio, as biographical dictionaries tell us, raises a question: was he

⁵ Samuel Johnson & George Steevens. *The Plays of William Shakespeare*, P. 2.

⁶ Leslie Stephen & Sidney Lee. *Dictionary of National Biography*. London: Smith, Elder & Co. Vol. XVI., P. 18. 1888.

⁷ George Williamson. *Brian's Dictionary of Painters and Engravers*. Vol. II. London: G. Bell & Sons, 1903.

⁸ Joseph Strutt. *Biographical Dictionary of Engravers*, Vol. I. P. 264. London. 1785.

⁹ John Gould. *Biographical Dictionary of Painters, Sculptors, Engravers, and Architects*. Vol. I. London: G & A Greenland, 1838.

commissioned from overseas for this engraving for the Folio's publication? "There was no art in England that is to say in its limited sense of painting pictures or chiseling statues." Stopes explains. "There was not a sculptor in all England above the level of a tomb-maker; there was hardly a native painter before Hilliard, [1547–1619] and he became a painter after being a carver of jewelry. If men wanted their portraits painted they sent for foreign artists."¹⁰

Droeshout was commissioned then, as regards to the opinions of critics. Pollard writes: "If his (Jonson's) lines on Droeshout's portrait are compared with their subject, we may well be inclined to wonder whether he had seen the very doubtful masterpiece at the time that he wrote them."¹¹ Lee, in his 1915 *Life of Shakespeare*, remarks how "Jonson's testimony does no credit to his artistic discernment; the expression of countenance is neither distinctive nor lifelike."

Spielmann, in 1924, still adhered to the "mystery that veils so much in Shakespeare's genius, life, and work, involves also some aspects of his iconography. It is probable that of Shakespeare more portraits have been painted, drawn, engraved, and modelled, than of any other uncrowned King of men. The British Museum, it is true, according to its Catalogue, has only about 200 engraved portraits of the poet. The Grolier Club of New York, at its Tercentenary Exhibition in 1916, did better with about 450, including 50 each of the Bust and the Droeshout Plate. Many of us no doubt could have added scores to these. And yet, of all these presentments only two portraits of the poet can be regarded as authentic; that greatly simplifies the problem. Yet neither is directly a life-portrait."¹² Spielmann regarded as authentic the "Stratford Monument" as he did Martin Droeshout's image on the title-page of the First Folio.

The *Tailor and Cutter* newspaper, in its issue of March 9, 1911, stated that the figure of Droeshout's, was undoubtedly clothed in an impossible coat composed of the back and the front of the same left arm. And in the following April, the *Gentleman's Tailor Magazine*, under the heading of a "Problem for the Trade," prints the two halves of the coat, shoulder to shoulder, and reports:

It is passing strange that something like three centuries should have been allowed to elapse before the tailor's handiwork should have been appealed to in this particular manner. The special point is that in what is known as the authentic portrait of William Shakespeare, which appears in the celebrated First Folio edition, published in 1623, a remarkable sartorial puzzle is apparent. The tunic, coat, or whatever the garment may have been called at the time, is so strangely illustrated that the right-hand side of the forepart is obviously the left-hand side of the back part; and so gives a harlequin appearance to the figure, which it is not unnatural to assume was intentional, and done with express object and purpose.

Gentleman's Tailor Magazine (April 1911)

¹⁰ *Burbage & Shakespeare's Stage*. P. 3. London: Alexander Moring Ltd., 1913.

¹¹ *Shakespeare Folios and Quartos*. P. 122. 1909.

¹² *A Comparative Study of the Droeshout Portrait and the Stratford Monument*. London: Humphrey Milford; Oxford University Press, 1924.

To which “object and purpose,” the artist drew a coat, composed of the back and the front of the same left arm, which would “assume an intention,” the editor of the magazine never alluded to.

Conclusion

We cannot, upon this evidence, regard Droeshout’s image as being the Bard; and to compare the Cobbe portrait with Droeshout’s sketch, coming to a conclusion that it is the Immortal Bard, is a dangerous path to take, especially for a scholar like Stanley Wells who feels 99% surety that Cobbe is William Shakespeare.

Such misconceptions lead to exaggerated eagerness, to falsehood of being the first person in history to find Shakespeare; but it does not help us truly find Shakespeare. Instead, it allows critics to refute any research in the future, and possibly debunk an original portrait that may still be hidden in some personal vault of a collector. We end with a critic’s saying to close this article: “The biographers must re-write their Lives of Shakespeare.”